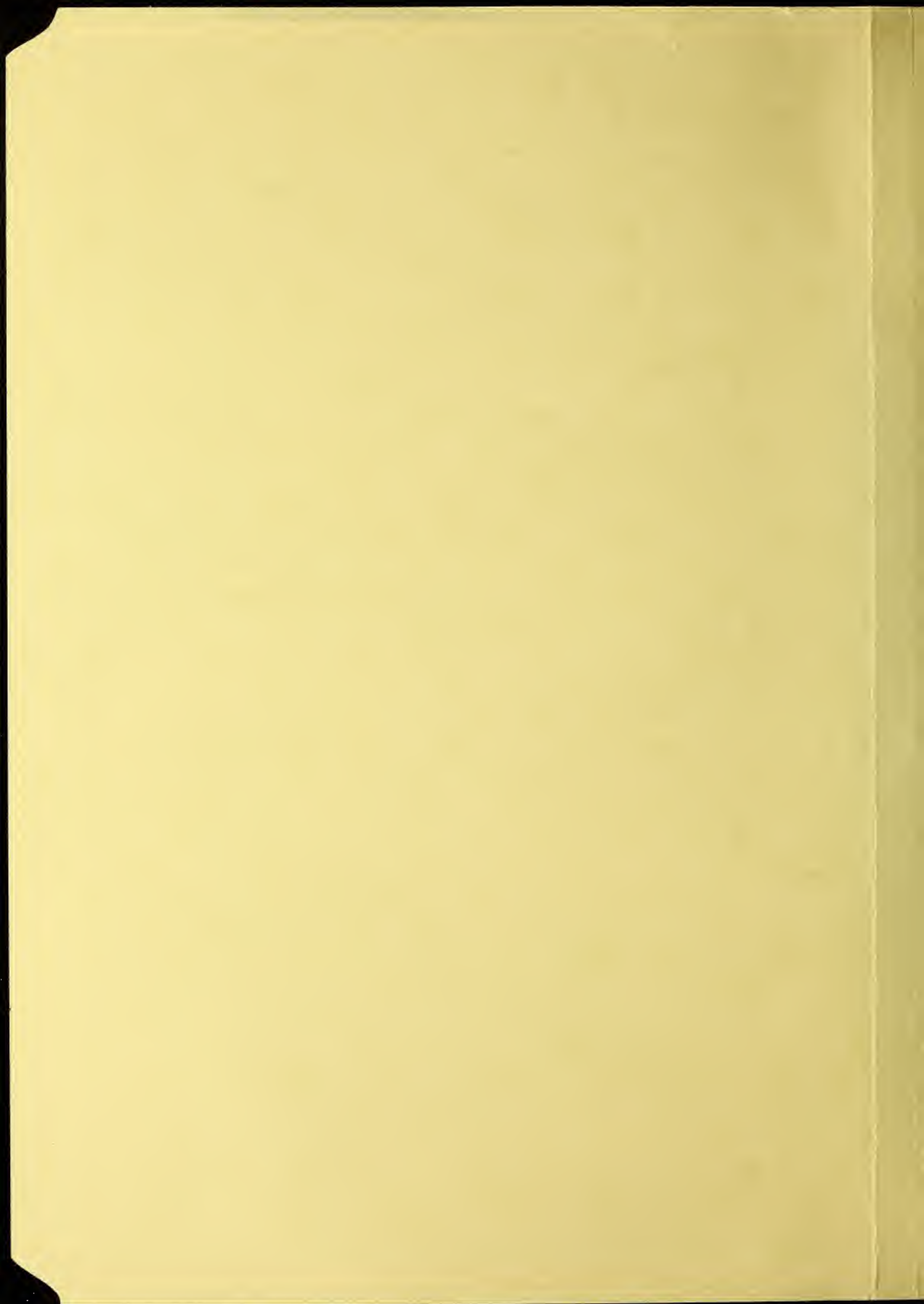


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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

Adlai E. Stevenson

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Address by The Honorable Adlai E. Stevenson, United States Representative to the United Nations, at the Emancipation Proclamation Ceremonies, Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D. C., September 22, 1962.

This day just a hundred years ago, America reached a turning point.

It was five days after Antietam. In the South Mountain defiles and on the fields around Sharpsburg ghastly clumps of dead soldiers lay unburied. The foul weeds of civil war -- hatred, fury, cruelty -- grew ranker as the lists of slain and wounded filled the bulletin boards, and the hospital trains crept North and South between lines of harrowed watchers. In Europe, leaders pondered intervention; some ready to take harsh advantage of the New World's agony; some like Gladstone racked with anxiety to stop the slaughter.

Then came the flash, the lightning stroke that enables men to see the changes wrought by the storm. A haggard President told his cabinet and his Maker that if the foe was driven from Union soil, he would declare the slaves "forever free". Within hours headlines all over this land clamored with the world "Emancipation!" Within days every slave had heard the news. Within weeks people all over the world were hailing the redemption of young America's promise.

Like all title deeds of human progress, the Proclamation of Emancipation meant more than it said. Morally it meant that American civilization and human bondage were irrevocably incompatible. And a panoply of larger freedoms was bound up in that first small step. For the Proclamation touched not the fate of Americans alone; it gave courage to the oppressed from the Thames to the Ganges; it inaugurated a new age of world wide reforms. It was an application of the basic tenets of the Nation, tenets which gave promise, said Lincoln, that "in due time the weight would be lifted from the shoulders of all men."

Since we admit so readily our gratitude and our debt to other nations for their enrichment of our national fabric, I hope it will not seem immodest to others that Americans take such pride in the momentous milestone we commemorate today nor in the globe-circling spread of our spirit of national independence and individual freedom. During the past two centuries the two have walked hand in hand. Beside national independence in 1776 stood the goal of individual freedom; beside the preservation of the Union in 1862 stood the same great idea -- planted there by the most beloved of American leaders.

And today -- just a century later -- freedom is again at stake. This time the whole worldwide society of men is perilously divided on the issue. National independence has swept the earth like wildfire, but individual freedom is still the great unfinished business of the world today. Once more we doubt whether the human experiment can survive half slave and half free. Once more we feel, as men did in Lincoln's day, that the future of mankind itself depends upon the outcome of the struggle in which we are engaged.

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In this context, with this urgency, with these fears, it would be easy enough to slip into the path of cloudy rhetoric. I could paint you a picture of this world struggle in which our adversaries would be pitch black and we -- "the land of the free and the home of the brave" -- would be lily white.

Such speeches are not too difficult to concoct. But since today we celebrate not only the act of Emancipation, but also the Great Emancipator who sits brooding behind me, it is well to point out that Lincoln, throughout all the agonies and defeats, and the breath-taking triumphs of the Civil War, never made such a speech. Never did he define his cause -- this overwhelming cause of freedom -- in terms of white and black, good and bad, excellence and evil. Abraham Lincoln never stooped to the cheap rhetoric of the patriotic occasion. Instead he continued, obstinately and greatly, to see human affairs and human emotions in all their complexity and ambiguity, and to refuse the snap judgments into which self-righteousness can so easily lead us all. If ever a leader lived by the Biblical injunction -- "Judge not, lest ye be judged" -- it was Lincoln. For him, truth was the groundwork of freedom, and you could no more build victory upon delusion than you could sustain society in slavery. And this is reason enough for his saintly rank among world statesmen.

So if today we wish to honor both the act of emancipation and the man who framed it, we have to follow in the same dedication to truth, and the same abhorrence for pretension and self deceit. We know that we uphold the cause of freedom. Equally we know that we risk betraying it if we have any illusions about our failures and insufficiencies.

If the issue between North and South sometimes seemed ambiguous to Lincoln; if, as in the Second Inaugural, he recognized the equal complicity of Northerners organizing the slave trade and Southerners profiting by the results, so, too, today we must approach the theme of freedom in the world context with some of Lincoln's modesty and accuracy.

Are we the pure-souled defenders of freedom when Negro citizens are anywhere denied the right to vote, or to equal education, or to equal opportunity? Can we be surprised if, abroad, friends with sadness and enemies with delight observe the inequalities and injustices which still mar our American image?

In his day, Lincoln was bitterly attacked for this unwillingness to take the straight partisan line, to claim all virtue for the North, all evil for the South, to praise himself and his cause, to damn all his adversaries. His sense that issues might be relative and ambiguous roused men of rougher certitude to furies of denunciation, and Lincoln was accused of weakness, even of treachery, because he could not go along with the single-minded jingoism of much of the propaganda of his day.

So today, there is a danger that those who do not see things in the stark contrasts of black and white will be denounced as feeble and even treacherous. It is therefore worth while recalling that Lincoln's sense of the complexity of all great historical issues did not hold him back for one hour from "doing the right" as God gave him to see the right, or deter him from emancipating the slaves and fighting a great war to its finish to ensure that the Union would be preserved and the Emancipation honored.

So today, our sense of our own failures and weaknesses in the struggle for freedom does not mean, for one instant, any faltering in the sacrifices which are necessary to ensure that the Western democracies and the unaligned peoples of the world have the shield against aggression that they need, and the aid necessary to uphold it. That we make no claim to final righteousness will help us to keep open all the paths to negotiation and fruitful compromise.

MORE

It does not -- any more than it did for Lincoln -- make us compromise with violence, aggression or fraud. We shall stand all the firmer for not standing in a false light. Our defence of freedom will be all the stronger for being based not on illusions but upon the truth about ourselves and our world. Freedom must be rooted in reality or it will crumble as errors are revealed and faith is shaken. Only the truth can make us free.

The immortal document that the Great Emancipator read to his advisers just one hundred years ago closed one era of American history and opened another. It freed the Negro from his age-old bondage; it freed the white people of the South from an out-worn and crippling institution; it freed the republic from the darkest stain upon its record. It gave freedom a mighty impulse throughout the globe. And it will surround the homely features of President Lincoln with an unfading halo.

But it marked a beginning, not an end; it was a call to a new battle -- a battle which rages around us in every part of the world in this new time of testing.

Truth was never the enemy of liberty, and it is no coincidence that the greatest statesman of liberty, the greatest champion freedom has ever known, was also the man who claimed least infallibility for himself and for his cause. We can be humble as he was humble -- knowing that the cause of freedom is greater than its defenders, and can triumph in spite of all their shortcomings.

In this spirit, we dare declare that the concern and dedication of our Union is the freedom of all mankind. With this candor, we can claim to be Lincoln's heirs in the unfinished work of emancipation.

WILLIAM
STEVENSON

